

How Arutchelvan became a reluctant politician

A Malay village turns an Indian youth colour blind

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For decades, he has been a familiar face at demonstrations, be it workers fighting for their rights or squatters defending their homes from demolition. As a result, PSM leader S. Arutchelvan has spent countless nights in police lock-ups.

He showed up for the interview at a restaurant in Petaling Jaya in a beat-up Perodua Kelisa, clad in his trademark PSM T-shirt and a vest adorned with a badge featuring the party's raised-fist logo.

The streaks of grey on his scruffy beard were more prominent now compared to when we first met at a protest in the late 90s.

Curious as to what made PSM central committee member S Arutchelvan, 51, tick, I asked when and how he had gravitated towards socialism.

"Believe it or not, it was a group of Malay villagers," he replied.

"When I was pursuing my Economics degree, my friends and I decided to provide free tuition classes [to Indian Malaysian plantation workers] in the estates.

"In one particular estate in Beranang (Selangor), the workers were protesting against unpaid wages and we joined them," he added.

Arutchelvan said in order to reach this remote estate, one must first travel through a Malay village.

"In solidarity with the Indian estate workers, the Malay villagers prevented the estate's bosses from using the road.

"And when Malay workers were hired to replace the Indians who were protesting, these villagers stopped the workers, telling them not to disturb the rice bowl of others.

"It then dawned on me that the working class and the poor do not look at skin colour but their common predicament. This experience shifted my perspective from race to class," he added.

'Kumar taught me to help, Nasir taught me to fight'

Arutchelvan credits PSM's sole incumbent lawmaker Dr Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj and the party's chairperson Dr Mohd Nasir Hashim as the two people who have inspired him the most.

"With Kumar (Jeyakumar), he is a simple and humble man. From him, I learned about helping the poor.

“Visit his house, see how modest it is. If you go to his clinic, his nurse always complains about how he treats people for free.”

From Nasir, Arutchelvan said he learned how to fight for the poor and to stand up against oppression without fear, even when confronted with police batons and the prospect of arrest.

“Nasir told us that when you fight for the people, do not stand in front of them because this would make you an elitist and you would be seen as leading them.

“Do not stand behind them, for it would make it seem as if you are instigating them from a safe distance. Stand next to them, face whatever that comes alongside them,” he revealed.

On whether he regrets choosing PSM instead of other parties, which could have opened the door to both power and fortune, Arutchelvan dismissed this with a quick wave of his hand.

“I have never once regretted. Come to our meetings, you will see the difference. We have Malays, Chinese, Indians, and people of all ethnic backgrounds and faiths. But we never talk about race or religion.

“There were opportunities for me to join the [government coalition] Malaysia Indian Congress (MIC) in the past. The feelers came directly from the former president (S) Samy Vellu himself. Some also told me to join [the major liberal opposition party] DAP if I wanted to be an MP,” he added.

Arutchelvan pointed out when a person joins PSM knowing that the current political climate would not provide room for personal political advancement, this shows that the person is dedicated and committed to the struggle.

“These are the choices we make in life. I enjoy the comradeship in PSM. This might not be the easiest route in Malaysian politics, but for me, it is the most satisfying and rewarding route. You cannot put a price on something like that.

“I also believe that we are the future. This trend can be seen throughout the world. Look at Bernie Sanders (in US) and Jeremy Corbyn (in UK), for example.

“So without the slightest reservation or hesitation, I can tell you that I have no regrets. This is my calling,” he stressed.

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